

STATEMENT OF SULIN SCHAFER

WIFE OF AIR FORCE VETERAN ERRICK SCHAFER

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE & MEMORIAL
AFFAIRS**

December 4, 2013

*Adjudicating VA's Most Complex Disability Claims: Ensuring Quality, Accuracy
and Consistency on Complicated Issues*

My name is Sulin Schafer. My husband, Errick Schafer is a veteran of the United States Air Force. He served for about 10 years as a fire fighter and had been on multiple deployments. We have been married for almost twelve years, and have two young sons. Errick is also young (in his thirties). He was a top performing military service member, and also participated in any sport with a ball. He coached my oldest son's sport teams; bass fished, went to the gym, and ate healthy everyday. He was full of energy and had a very contagious laugh. He did everything right to maintain his health.

These days, my husband spends most of his days either sitting on our living room couch or laying in bed. He depends on me to get him in and out of bed, get dressed, eat, bathe, and use the bathroom. My once energetic husband who was full of laughter and life is now confined to a body that he cannot control. If that wasn't enough, he no longer has that contagious laugh and can't hold our newborn son. What's the cause of all this misery? In November 2012, Errick was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS/Lou Gehrig Disease). The doctor said it was military service connected. Apparently, there are military service members who have been deployed to the Middle East, like my husband, and have been diagnosed with this death sentence.

The doctor suggested we go through the Veteran's Administration to file a claim for the disability. When Errick first filed the claim, in November 2012, he was still able to walk. The VA granted Errick a decision of 100% for ALS. By this November, I must transport Errick in a manual wheelchair to get around the house. He cannot use his hands or legs. He cannot speak clearly, so he is silent for the majority of the time he is awake. We rarely leave the house because of the difficulty it takes to get in and out of the vehicle. For a couple of months, because I was pregnant, my husband had friends from the fire department coming over to help. In October, I gave birth to our son, and now have to go back to work in the beginning of December.

Errick had applied for the SMC for Aide and Attendance, and was granted the upgrade. When we discussed the upgrade with a friend, he advised us that the amount did not sound right for the condition my husband is in. He suggested we speak with his father in law who had retired from the VA as a "rater". Our friend's father in law looked over the decision letter and confirmed that my husband was entitled to a higher rating because he has no use of his upper or lower extremities. He assisted us in filing a Notice of Disagreement and told me to submit it to the VA Representative near Eglin Air Force Base.

Early November, I went to the VA near Eglin AFB to attempt to submit the NOD to the representative. She told me she would look over it for me. After a short overview of the NOD, she told me that it was wrong, and that my husband has the highest rating for SMC. Being that I am not an expert on filing claims with the VA, I believed her to be correct. She said she would fix the NOD and call me within a couple days when she was done with it. I spoke to our friend's father in law, and he said he would escort me to the VA office the next time I went. Well, a couple days passed, and then a week, but I did not hear from the representative. I decided to just go in, and I brought our friend's father in law. He explained to her the difference between pension and compensation, and that my husband, based on his current condition, is entitled to a much higher rating than what he is receiving. It appeared that she did not know what our friend was explaining, even after he showed her in text a list of ratings directly from the VA website. Needless to say, we left there with nothing accomplished and the disappointment of still being told by a VA representative that my husband was still not entitled to anything else.

It saddened me to think of the many other veterans who have turned to her for guidance and help in filing their claims, and possibly were turned away from what they are entitled to. This encounter has delayed the process of filing my husband's NOD. Right now we really need it to hire someone to care for my husband for the hours that I am at work. With a diagnosis like ALS, when time is not on our side, this is an issue that needed to be handled more delicately and expeditiously. I have sent the NOD with the original disagreement. I have lost confidence in the knowledge that the VA representatives should have.